

From research on children to research *with* them: transformative methodological learnings

Da pesquisa sobre crianças à pesquisa *com* elas: aprendizagens metodológicas transformadoras

De la investigación sobre niños a la investigación *con* ellos: aprendizajes metodológicos transformadores

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Highlights

The protagonism of children in the research and production of records.

The (trans)formative nature of the research that emerged from the narratives and records.

The research with children and the power of records and narratives as aesthetic experience.

Abstract

The article describes the methodological and formative lessons learned from a research project with children, carried out in a multi-age Early Childhood Education class. Highlights include a deeper understanding of sensitive listening, due to the intense daily interaction with the children; overcoming methodological models that are limited in the face of the dynamism of research with children and their different languages; the relationship with records that brought out the power of documentation, involving narration, reflection and learning centered on experience. The organization of the times and spaces had an impact on the quality of the daily interactions with the children and the resulting elaborations.

[Resumo](#) | [Resumen](#)

Keywords

Early childhood education. Research with children. Multi-age education. Sensitive listening.

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| Introduction

This article is an excerpt from a master's thesis linked to the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências do Movimento e Reabilitação (PPGCMR) at the Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM), and its purpose is to expose the methodological and formative learning derived from research with children¹, carried out in a multi-age Early Childhood Education class in the city of Santa Maria – Rio Grande do Sul (RS).

The research process was carried out in an Early Childhood Education unit linked to the UFSM for over 30 years, which is free of charge and open to the city's community, with children admitted via public notice and lottery. The highlight of the institution is that the children play a leading role in the pedagogical proposal and planning, as well as in daily life; and in its organization by multi-age classes, which consists of children from two to five years old living together, instead of classes by age group.

The master's research from which this article originates aimed to understand how children play and move² (Kunz, 2014) in a multi-age Early Childhood Education arrangement. The researcher's participation in the daily life of the institution gave new meaning to methodological concepts and the literature of childhood studies; it also exposed the challenges of doing research with children while respecting and valuing the hundred and one hundred more (Malaguzzi, 2015) ways in which children choose to express themselves, communicate and interact. Among the experiences that came out of the research, this article aims to explain the deepening of the understanding of sensitive listening, based on the intense daily interaction with the children, as well as the relationship with the records that brought out the power of documentation, involving narrating, reflecting and learning centered on experience, making it possible to elaborate on considerations about overcoming methodological models that have proven to be limited in the face of the dynamism of research with children and their different languages.

| Times spaces and the proposed multi-age organization

As discussed by Ongaro et al. (2019), the configuration of routines in early childhood schools implies the need to consider children's apprehension of time. In particular, this involves considering the divergences between adult and child conceptions of time, which in turn requires a reassessment of the dichotomy

1 Methodologies that actively involve children in research, prioritizing their expressions, actions and interactions, promoting attentive listening to direct the investigation according to their contributions and statements (Demartini, 2011; Sarmento, 2011).

2 A theory that broadens the understanding of human movement beyond its utilitarian function, recognizing a dialogical relationship between human beings who move in order to attribute meaning, intention and significance

between chronos time and aión time, as discussed by Kohan (2004). For the author, chronos time refers to the chronological, linear, and measurable aspect of time, while aión time relates to the experiential dimension, feelings, emotions, and internal time. In this context, children stand out for their ability to reconfigure the routine by adopting a perspective that allows them to see beyond what happens in the repetitive day-to-day events that make up institutional routines. They can assign new meanings and create narratives not anticipated by adults (Nunes et al., 2022). Carvalho and Fochi's (2017, p. 16) argument emphasizes that through everyday experiences there is an opportunity to identify the extraordinary within children's ordinary experiences. Time in children's vision tends to focus on minutiae, as they perceive aspects that escape the perception of adults (Salva, 2016; Alves & Brandão, 2017).

Due to the prevalence of adult-centric culture, which often neglects or underestimates children's expressions, creations, and contributions, a clash often emerges between the notions of chronos time and aión time in the contexts in which adults and children interact, especially in educational environments. On the one hand, the temporal and spatial arrangements outlined by adults, typically anchored in conventional temporal indicators, are inflexible and often leave no room for the unexpected or the minutiae perceived by children.

In this sense, the context investigated is innovative in that it organizes classes without following age division patterns, investing in a multi-age group arrangement that is powerful in terms of interaction and play experiences between children and adults (Mata, 2012; Prado, 2016); and in structuring pedagogical work in such a way as to value and respect the unique relationship that children have with time, making routines more flexible so that it is not an imposition of adult time, thus giving centrality to children.

The proposal for multi-age groupings was introduced through a pilot project in 2008 at the institution under investigation. The aim was to provide care for children who had not been selected by lottery to join the regular classes, which were traditionally divided by age group. As a result of this initiative, the "Integration Class" emerged, a group of children aged between one and four.

This pioneering experience triggered a process of transformation at the institution. Considering the previous structure that separated children by age group, the team recognized the importance of enabling children of different ages to live together and interact. This approach not only promoted a pedagogy that values differences but also challenged universally applied theories of child development, resisting rigid standards (Cancian & Goelzer, 2019).

Another argument for the proposed multi-age organization takes into account that the experience of childhood is shared and inter-age (Prado, 2016), and that outside of school children interact with others of different age groups (in the neighborhood, in the family, at parties, among others). In this context, the structuring of classes according to age groups reflects motivations and interests stemming from capitalism and the demands of the world of work, which include the categorization

and classification of children based on chronological progress, in the name of cognitive aptitudes. The basis of these propositions rests largely on the maximum promotion of competencies and skills aimed at guaranteeing productive efficiency in the future, similar to the considerations discussed by Kunz and Costa (2017), Stavinski and Kunz (2017), and Arenhart (2016) regarding the acceleration of childhood and the anticipation of schooling processes.

Through ethnographic research carried out in a public school in São Paulo, Prado (2016) showed that children aged between 3 and 6 establish connections with different partners – teachers, older children, younger children, boys, and girls – during different daily activities in Early Childhood Education, including moments such as rest, meals and play, among others. These interactions, which take place in heterogeneous groups, contribute significantly to the diversification of children's cultures, promoting the creation of new ways of playing and living together.

Based on this observation, multi-age interactions emerge as empowering in living with differences, as both children and adults are in constant contact with each other's limitations and possibilities. This process enables an understanding of singularities, the formation of new ways of living together, and the promotion of mutual respect (Mata, 2012; Löffler & Fleig, 2019).

As Prado (2016) points out, Early Childhood Education plays the role of providing a scenario for experimentation, rather than anticipating schooling. In this context, the planning perspective of the institution investigated, according to Cancian and Goelzer (2016), diverges from the concept of implementing predefined activities or introducing written culture prematurely to prepare children for the early years (Fonseca & Bolzan, 2017). Instead, the emphasis is on structuring times and spaces so that children take on an active and leading role in their meaning-making and learning processes. This approach gives centrality to the child, respecting their particular times and fostering their autonomy.

It's worth noting that this approach doesn't translate into an absence of pedagogical intent, since the teachers' role isn't limited to being passive observers of children's activities. On the contrary, they position themselves as planners and organizers of spaces conducive to interpretation and transformation.

This form of multi-age, child-centered organization favors a different quality of interaction and experiences related to play, which are structuring axes of the Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC) at the Early Childhood Education stage (Goelzer et al., 2019; Ongaro et al., 2019; Brasil, 2019).

Although often mentioned, the term "sensitive listening" goes beyond hearing and encompasses participation and interest in children's small actions. This perspective recognizes children's various forms of communication, which are not limited to speech. Children's bodies are a form of expression, revealing desires and needs. Listening to these different languages is a way of recognizing children as social agents, going beyond the limited view of dependency. This can help overcome the

one-sided view that tends to see children only as incapable and dependent (Cancian & Goelzer, 2016; Löffler & Fleig, 2019). Listening is also understood as:

time, listening time, a time outside of chronological time – a time full of silences, long pauses, an inner time. Inner listening, listening to ourselves, as a pause, a suspension, an element that engenders listening to others, but which is also generated by listening to what others have of us. (Rinaldi, 2020, p. 124)

Through this form of listening, the times and spaces of this institution are designed. This involves the children as partners in defining the next actions. The plans are not made for them, but from and in collaboration with them. This aims to establish an equal relationship between all those involved and recognizes children as active participants, capable of attributing unique meanings, which are not always foreseen by adults (Prado, 2016).

Although the teachers and fellows plan the spaces intentionally, there is an attempt not to direct the children's actions according to their expectations. This implies being open to surprises and to children's protagonism to encourage their creations and improve play (Löffler & Fleig, 2019).

On the other hand, the same authors point out that this bodily disposition towards sensitive and thorough listening is not a method that can be replicated, as it is not inherent, but something that requires constant practice and exercise. It also requires the deconstruction of certainties and a willingness to be unpredictable, with the aim of understanding and exploring the various ways in which children communicate. From this understanding, it becomes possible to (re)construct opportunities and experiences of sensitive listening.

The centrality of the children in the daily life of the institution is also reflected in their movement to their reference rooms, as well as to the other environments³. In the classrooms, the proposals planned by the teachers and fellows were organized into "corners". They explain that planning these activities involves listening to the children and that "the spaces are transformed and the activities are reconfigured, gaining new facets, new plots, other perspectives from the children's point of view" (Ongaro et al., 2019, p. 119). This means that the spaces are not static but change according to the demands and choices of the group.

There is a deep respect for the children's rhythms in the routines, which is also reflected in the meals. For example, although there is a set time for lunch, this is often adapted based on the children's morning activities.

For this to be possible, all the professionals involved must share the same understanding: the teachers, the scholarship holders, and the kitchen and cleaning staff. This approach requires daily practice, manifested in the interactions between children and adults, as well as between the adults themselves in the Early Childhood Education Unit. Mealtimes were not limited by a specific time; each child experienced lunch and dessert in their unique way, eating at their own pace and

3 It should be noted that no child moves around the school grounds unaccompanied by an adult.

taking their time. It was common to observe that some children would finish their meal, perform oral hygiene, and then go outside accompanied by the scholarship holders. Meanwhile, the other children continued to finish their meals.

| Methodological experience of research with children: (trans)formation in context

The methodology used in the research⁴ was ethnographic in inspiration, involving participant observations, field diary entries, and immersion in the daily life of a multi-age class with children aged between two and five. In addition, narrative research guided the reflections and analysis of the data produced by the children and the teachers/scholars in that class. As the main method of data production, the researcher kept a field diary where she took notes on events and interactions with the group.

The field of education is fertile ground for adopting narrative research since both teachers and students play roles not only as storytellers but also as characters in their own and others' plots (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; 1995; Cunha, 1997). In everyday life, these stories intertwine, making it impossible to consider that narratives arise alone. On the contrary, they intertwine like a web. Therefore, life narratives constitute the backdrop that gives meaning to situations in the school context, constructing and reconstructing these social and personal stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995). Cunha (1997, p. 187) points out that "when a person recounts the events they have experienced, they reconstruct the path they have traveled, giving it new meanings". This is why experience can become a quality training opportunity for teachers (Ershler, 2003).

The process of bringing the researcher into the institution for the fieldwork phase demonstrated, through the actions and guidance of the staff, the centrality that the children occupy in the most different times and spaces of that daily routine. More than a simple formality between the researcher and the teaching team, the teaching administration took care to ensure that the researcher's entry was not predetermined by adults without the children's knowledge and consent. The guidance given was a period of adaptation and observations, in collective environments, so that the children would react to the researcher's presence, approaching what Corsaro (2005) calls reactive entry⁵. Based on these interactions, the research's collaborating class was delineated.

It should also be taken into account that the period in which the field phase took place corresponds to the first half of 2021, a time of great insecurity regarding the return of face-to-face activities in schools and other public places due to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). This was an aggravating factor that delayed research deadlines, altered methodological procedures, and affected interactions

4 Master's research approved by the UFSM Research Ethics Committee 52119521.0.0000.5346.

5 A non-invasive approach, respecting the children's time to react to the researcher's presence.

with children and adults at the institution due to health protocols and social distancing.

Once the target group for the research had been defined, the researcher began to participate very intensively in the daily life of that group, in hygiene, feeding, and play processes, among others. Welcoming the class, both the children in it and the adults in charge (the reference teacher and the scholarship holders), allowing for a deep and rich experience of research with children in terms of interactions, learning about data production and research methodologies, and the challenges of doing research with children without the adult-centered gaze that judges their ways of meaning the world and expressing themselves.

In addition to the experiences of interacting with the children and adults in that group, I also came into contact with the various works produced by people who have been and still are part of that institution's history. These productions are expressions of the lessons learned 30 years ago and which continue to be reworked and deepened by those⁶ who occupy that space today.

From the moment we first entered the room, we took a few moments to explore the environment with an attentive and observant eye. An excerpt from the work carried out by Ostetto (2017, p. 47) highlights the importance of the "aesthetic dimension as a pedagogical value". According to the author, the aesthetic dimension represents an "attitude of zeal that guides decisions, that is concerned with the manner and content of the message, that shows respect, that gets involved, since it is intrinsically linked to an ethical aspect" (Ostetto, 2017, p. 47). This was the stance adopted throughout the research.

The perception of how the layout of the spaces had an influence began to emerge, awakening sensations and establishing a connection with the group present. Another idea addressed by Ostetto (2017) that deserves to be highlighted is the concept of "enthesia" and "anesthesia", in which the author explores the interconnection of the aesthetic dimension: the individual affecting the world and being affected by it – "enthesia" – as opposed to detachment and indifference to the surroundings – "anesthesia". From this perspective, the aesthetic dimension stimulates relationships, fosters interactions, nurtures sensibilities, and encourages forms of expression (Ostetto, 2017, p. 48).

According to the authors and teachers, the act of listening to children is emphasized, understanding that "environments undergo changes and approaches are adjusted, acquiring new aspects, new narratives and different views from the child's perspective" (Ongaro et al., 2019, p. 119). This implies that spaces are not static, but rather malleable, adapting according to the needs and choices of the group.

The layout of the room involved different "corners", which changed throughout the day. The data produced shows that there is no single "corner" or proposal that

⁶ Even though we recognize the participation of men in the daily life of Early Childhood Education, in the context investigated, most of the adult subjects in the group are women.

applies uniformly to all the children. Instead, multiple arrangements are created, encouraging the children to go beyond the pre-established uses, contributing and modifying the environment according to their wishes. When the group or a child expresses an interest in specific materials or toys, such requests are accommodated whenever possible.

According to Marina and Wolf (2017, p. 63), "the configuration of furniture and the positioning of equipment can positively or negatively influence children's autonomy, their interactions with objects and peers, among other factors". Corroborating this, Rinaldi (2020) points out that the organization of spaces reflects an intention that can stimulate rich experiences and interactions or be devoid of possibilities for children to evolve or contribute. In Italian pedagogy, the concept that "the environment acts as an additional educator" is evident (Soares, 2017, p. 143).

Recognizing the heterogeneous ways in which children express themselves and interact with each other and with the spaces guides the planning of proposals in the classes. Their role in reinventing times and spaces is what makes the routine meaningful, flexible, and unexpected. The data produced by the group reveals that the way the spaces were organized also revealed a temporality centered on the children and their actions.

As the experiences with the group intensified, the understanding of the meaning of researching and thinking narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2011) increased. It was no longer possible to conceive of the research as isolated experiences, but rather as connected to the researcher's story and the stories of the people and places that made up this trajectory. This process led to a significant transformation in the records kept throughout the field research period. More than mere notes, the researcher understood the ability to narrate experiences and, from this narrative, to deepen the analysis carried out.

Bogdan and Biklen (1994) discuss the importance of the field diary and records in the research process. The field diary is an important supplementary material that is often used in qualitative research methods to produce data, as it allows perceptions and comments to be recorded without the requirement of academic writing rigor. These notes

can give rise in each study to a personal diary that helps the researcher to follow the development of the project, visualize how the research plan has been affected by the data collected, and become aware of how he or she (the researcher) has been influenced by the data. (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994, p. 151)

As the interactions with the group intensified, the records became more and more careful, leading to an understanding of the field diary as a storybook, filled with written narratives. The records evolved from descriptions to deeper reflections, accompanied by re-elaborations, and memories, but also doubts and uncertainties. It's worth pointing out that the formality and rigor of the records as a scientific research method didn't eliminate the pleasure of recording but helped give the fieldwork a new meaning. Likewise, the new relationship established with the records and their processes did not prevent their rigor and formality.

In this way, the field diary came to represent a pleasant and safe space in which to record impressions about the experience in the field and the research, without being overly concerned about academic rigor. Using the method of recorded interviews as an example, the authors (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994, p. 150) support the use of the field diary as a valuable complement, taking into account that "the tape recorder cannot capture the sights, smells, impressions and extra comments made before and after the interview". The understanding now is that the details (records that include dirt stains, scribbles, and children's drawings) are what make the field diary so special, in addition to the memories recorded.

Documenting is telling stories, bearing narrative witness to children's culture, ideas, and different ways of thinking, it is inventing plots, poeticizing events, giving meaning to existence, building channels to break away from the traditionally grey, rigid, framed "school" language that so often silences adults and children; documentation is authorship, it is creation. (Ostetto, 2017, p. 30)

The same author, quoting Rinaldi (2020), points out the need to rescue children's sense of wonder in their discovery processes and that this means looking sensitively at them and oneself. Records based on this sensitive gaze enhance "our way of knowing and expressing knowledge, including a taste for beauty, which is an experience and not an empty detail" (Ostetto, 2017, p. 49). This reveals two important aspects of the process of recording: as well as being a research method, it is also formative from a human point of view.

The narratives worth highlighting include the transformation in the way the researcher relates to the records, giving up the commitment to passive description, and adopting a participatory stance with the children.

In the playground, I put my notebook aside to play with "N" and for a few moments I "undressed" from the posture of the researcher. Not that it wasn't research, but I realize that at times the task of writing in a notebook prevents me from fully living in the present with the children. I'm still in the process of discovering other ways of doing research, the children demand it. (Field diary entry)

The expression "undressing" from the researcher's posture paradoxically represents an increase in the density of the records. It is not, therefore, a question of abandonment, but of a change in attitude that ends up bringing strength to the records and enhancing the analysis process. Transitioning from reading about research with children to concrete experience, sometimes questioning the role of the researcher in the midst of surrendering to the experiences that the field provided (Siqueira & Favret-Saada, 2005).

Another piece of evidence of the openness to new ways of interacting with children is the dirt stains printed on the pages of the field diary. They represent the need expressed by Goelzer (2020, p. 222): "We teachers need to open up our *whole selves* to live experiences *with* children".

We took the treasure hunt to the mud box, where more children came over to play together. There are small sinks with taps at the children's disposal and it didn't take long for them to get water to mix with the earth. With pieces of twigs,

the children mixed the earth and water, forming mud of different textures [...] that moment was particularly enjoyable because it took me back to my childhood. Playing with mud at my grandmother's house was something I did very often. I played alone for a long time (at least it seemed like a long time to me because I got so involved), I remember the satisfying sensation of stirring the mud, imagining cakes and pies, I remember purposely "dirtying" my hands and watching the mud harden, then washing it off and feeling my hands soften. We all got dirty, some a little, some more, but it wasn't a problem and it didn't stop them from continuing to play. There's even a speck of dirt on the page of this record as evidence. (Field diary entry)

The (trans)formative process took place as the researcher became aware of the richness of the interactions with the children, which took place in the different times and spaces of the institution, allowing her to build a bond with that group. At the same time, the narrative perception of the experiences with the children and the adults in the class increased the density of the records, materializing the lessons learned from doing research with children.

| Final considerations

It is important to point out that the choice of title for the last section of the text, despite indicating finitude, refers only to this text. The reflections arising from the master's research continue to reverberate with each new production, generating other questions and new reworkings.

The protagonism and centrality of the children in the daily life of the researched institution are widely addressed in their productions, however, it was only after actively participating in the daily life of the class that the researcher was able to materialize the intentionality expressed in the ways of conducting school practices.

Today, we can see that all the learning that took place with that group was based on a context that provided a variety of experiences for both the children and the adults present in that environment. This scenario, combined with the guidelines that guide the group, turns everyday experiences into moments of (trans)formation for everyone involved.

The research experience in that institution provided a deeper understanding of how children attribute meaning to their experiences and choose to express themselves. Reviewing the written records confirmed existing impressions: the intensity of the researcher's experiences with that group. Understanding the power of revisiting these memories to give them new meanings and reflect on the experiences made it possible to form new learning experiences. As well as being a methodological procedure, this approach proved to be profoundly (trans)formative. When re-reading the records, new comments and elaborations were incorporated, which led to in-depth reflections on the connection established collectively and on the unique opportunity to improve sensitive listening with the children.

An important learning experience when working with children in a multi-age class was the understanding that the adult's role in this context is to act as a mediator of play and interaction, rather than being the protagonist. The adult's responsibility

consists of enhancing play and interaction through sensitive listening and attentive observation, broadening experiences through new and different approaches.

Decentralizing the adult's presence implies opening up to the unknown and fascinating world of uncertainties, the unpredictable, and the spontaneity that emerges from the different ways in which children engage with each other and the surrounding environment. This is a significant challenge and a process of constant disruption, especially considering that initial training programs often do not adopt this perspective to guide pedagogical practices aimed at children, often remaining centered on adults, leaving them in the background.

In this context, this institution stands out as an innovative environment for initial and continuing training, since it instigates continuous reflection on pedagogical approaches that recognize and start from children's times, enunciations, and singularities. It should be noted that overcoming established practices centered on adults also extends to research processes with children, such as the researcher's approach to the field, as already exemplified.

Finally, the process of this investigation indicates above all the leading role played by the children in their daily lives, including in the research process, when they actively claimed with more than a hundred utterances (Malaguzzi, 2015), the different ways they chose to express themselves, dislodging the researcher from passivity and inviting her to participate in their actions. The proximity to that group materialized an understanding of the multiple languages of children and the challenge of being fully present in interactions, and thus doing research with children.

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Resumo

O artigo expõe os aprendizados metodológicos e formativos oriundos de uma pesquisa com crianças, realizada em uma turma multietária de Educação Infantil. Destaca-se, assim: o aprofundamento da compreensão sobre escuta sensível, pela convivência intensa nos cotidianos com as crianças; a superação de modelos de metodologias que se mostram limitados diante da dinamicidade da pesquisa com crianças e suas diferentes linguagens; a relação com os registros que fez emergir a potência da documentação, envolvendo o narrar, o refletir e as aprendizagens centradas na experiência. A organização dos tempos-espacos impactou na qualidade das interações vividas no cotidiano com as crianças e nas decorrentes elaborações.

Palavras-chave: Educação Infantil. Pesquisa com crianças. Educação multietária. Escuta sensível.

Resumen

El artículo presenta aprendizajes metodológicos y formativos derivados de una investigación con niños realizada en una clase de Educación Infantil multi-edad. Entre los puntos destacados se incluyen: una comprensión más profunda de la escucha sensible a través de interacciones diarias intensas con los niños; superar las limitaciones de las metodologías existentes frente a la naturaleza dinámica de la investigación con niños y sus diversos lenguajes; la relación con la documentación que puso de manifiesto el poder de la grabación, involucrando la narración, la reflexión y el aprendizaje centrado en la experiencia. La organización del tiempo y el espacio tuvo un impacto en la calidad de las interacciones experimentadas a diario con los niños y los desarrollos posteriores.

Palabras clave: Educación Infantil. Investigación con niños. Educación multi-edad. Escucha sensible.

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